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Living a Dream in Zululand

by Margaret Hiza Ardington, V73

If Timbuktu, the city in the West African nation of Mali, sounds remote from Philadelphia, Mandeni, Zululand on the east coast of South Africa is even further. That's where I've been living and working in a rural mixed practice with my husband, Peter, since 1975 when we settled on Cranburn, his family's sugarcane and cattle farm. I met Peter, a native South African, when he served as an intern and resident in bovine medicine and surgery at New Bolton Center from 1972-74. Sometimes, in an introspective moment, I shake my head, as if awakening from a dream and ask, "What am I doing here in Zululand of all places?"

A second generation American, I was steeped in the ethos of democracy, human rights and patriotism. In 1969, I graduated from Vassar College in my hometown of Poughkeepsie, N.Y., with a B.A. in biology and English. I had never desired to travel, so when my IBM engineer father asked if I'd like a trip overseas as a graduation present, my reply was, "No thank you, Dad. Someday I'll travel, but there'll be a good reason for it." The good reason arrived when I met Peter and was swept not only off my feet but also out of my country.

Peter proposed to me in a letter listing all the things I would find hard to adjust to in his country. He didn't want his American bride ignorant of the downsides of living in remotest Africa with later regrets. Before saying yes, I had to visit Peter's farm and family. The farm was breathtakingly beautiful, his family truly fantastic. I liked what I saw; I was young, immortal, invincible and very deeply in love. I said, "Yes," and promptly went to bed for two weeks with Rift Valley Fever from a calf post mortem.

A kaleidoscope of impressions from those early days swirls before me. Everything was so different – apartheid, no TV, antiquated telephones, an oppressive government and driving on the wrong side of the road. The Afrikaans accent was hard to understand but the Natal English accent was music to

anglophile ears. I taught myself Zulu out of a book, practicing it with James, our Zulu domestic worker, a man of great character, whose eye was stabbed out in a drunken brawl. This country of marked contrasts had delightfully wild places, wild animals and wild people. It was an amazing time living through Mandela's release, the end of apartheid and the start of a new democracy.

The differences extend to veterinary medicine but

ehrlichiosis, anaplasmosis and heartwater. We have been bitten by rabid cats and dogs and gone through the series of injections and the long wait to see if the slow virus wins. I absolutely hate African horse sickness; it makes

us feel so helpless watching our patients drown in their lung edema. Then there are the wild animals brought in to us – exquisitely beautiful gray duikers; quaint, sprightly bushpiglets; snakes and magnificent birds usually with broken wings for setting. Poaching with snares is practiced heavily so we see dreadful snare wounds in dogs. Bushpigs often leave dogs gutted by their razor sharp tusks.

It is interesting to note cultural differences in attitudes towards animals in our rainbow nation. Hindu clients religiously oppose euthanasia, even if it's the obvious humane answer. Zulu clients treat dogs as lowly creatures, while they revere their cattle as symbols of wealth, using them traditionally for lobola, a type of dowry. A Zulu client might walk for miles to come to us, dressed in rags with very little money, but another might arrive in a Mercedes. Ours is a practice that runs the gamut from First to Third World clientele daily.

In South Africa, our profession is composed of 2,500 registered veterinarians with a high level of practice, good camaraderie and excellent continuing education, frequently boosted by speakers from the United States. Peter served on the South Africa Veterinary Council for 18 years, and was president during the transition phase into the new South Africa. I believe our profession was very lucky to have a man of his caliber leading us. My contribution was to advise him and run the practice while he was away.

Bucking the white emigration trend, my parents came to live here. Vivacious and active, my 88-year old mother and our lovely daughters, Julia, 24, and Jacqui, 22, enrich our lives. And the answer to my question, "What am I doing here in Zululand?" is I'm living a dream and loving it!



Dr. Ardington with Jasmine and Affluent.



Dr. Ardington on Cranburn Farm.

I married a good teacher who was top of his graduating class. Many of the subtropical cocktail of African diseases that we as students just flipped past in our texts were coming through our hospital doors or seen in our fieldwork – tick borne diseases such as babesiosis,